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James Steinbiller Acapalo Ranch

Rancher sings praises of beefalo

■ **Cow-bison cross:** Heber man says meat tastes much better than regular beef.

By Darrin Lythgoe
Deseret News correspondent

HEBER CITY — People tell James Winkler it's impossible to get close to a buffalo, but he doesn't believe them.

"They're docile," he says, as a friendly half-ton buffalo named Miss Piggy takes feed from his hand and then licks his face in a giant wet kiss.

People from all over stop along the side of Route 40 in Heber to watch

Winkler's herd of nine buffaloes, which frequently entertain by playing "King of the Mountain" on a 20-foot high pile of soil.

"Between Denver and Salt Lake you don't see anything like this," says Winkler, who plans to move to Heber permanently next year with his wife, Barbara, and 4-year-old daughter, Robin. At the moment he is commuting between Heber and his New York home, where his family lives.

But the nine female buffaloes on Winkler's ranch two miles north of downtown Heber are only a part of a larger, even more unusual operation. Winkler is using them to breed a differ-

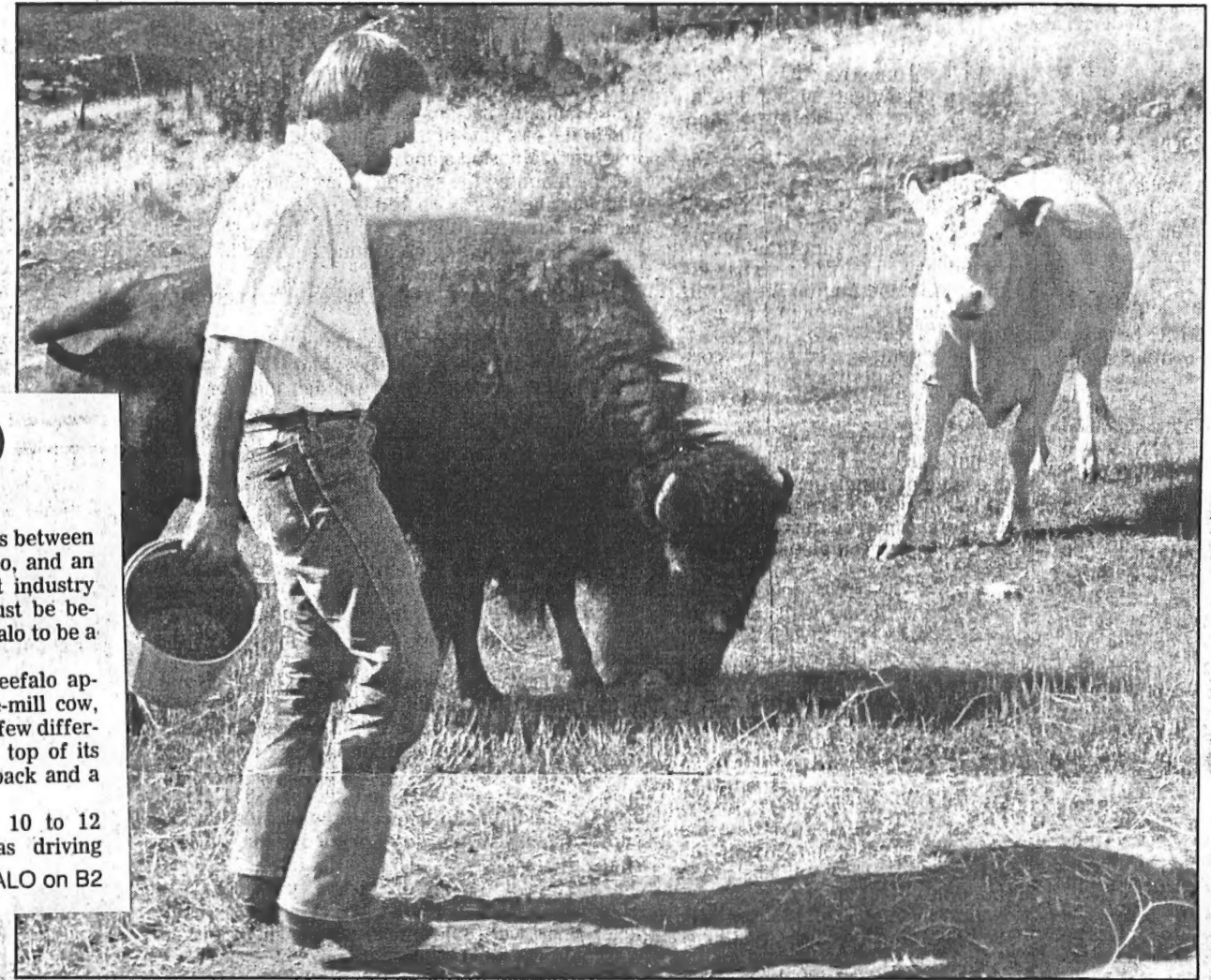
ent kind of animal: beefalo.

Beefalo? A beefalo is a cross between an American bison, or buffalo, and an ordinary hereford cow. Meat industry standards say the animal must be between 19 and 38 percent buffalo to be a beefalo.

To the untrained eye, a beefalo appears more like a run-of-the-mill cow, but a closer look will reveal a few differences, such as curly hair on top of its head, a larger hump on its back and a thicker, shinier coat.

But why beefalo? About 10 to 12 years ago, as Winkler was driving

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PHOTOGRAPHY/ STUART W. JOHNSON

James Winkler has a herd of nine female buffaloes that he uses to breed beefalo on his 250-acre Heber ranch.

BEEFALO

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through upstate New York, he noticed a place selling beefalo meat. Out of curiosity he stopped for a bite and discovered it to be the best meat he'd ever tasted.

He was hooked. So when he bought the 250-acre ranch in Heber six years ago, he decided to set up his own beefalo farm.

"I wanted to do something that most people are not doing," Winkler said.

He started with 40 beefalo. At the time, there were only about 400 beefalo ranchers in the country.

Today Winkler has nearly 200 head and is one of the increasing number of 1,200 beefalo produc-

ers. The industry, it appears, is growing fast.

"As more educated people get involved, they will realize that there's better quality in beefalo, and the whole meat industry will improve. If I didn't believe in it, I wouldn't be in the business. It's one of the best meats you can offer to any consumer."

And consumers apparently agree. Several area restaurants now offer beefalo meat and are receiving rave reviews.

Dave Loveless, manager of the Mountain Inn restaurant in Heber, sells about 600 beefalo burgers every week. He buys all his beefalo from Winkler.

"I get a lot of repeat customers for it," Loveless says. "It has started to catch on."

Winkler can't stop singing the

meat's praises. He cites study after study showing beefalo to be richer in protein and significantly lower in cholesterol and saturated fat. Most beefalo meat is between 8 and 95 percent lean, he says.

"The second I bite into someone's hamburger, I can taste the fat," Winkler said.

And beefalos are also economical to raise. They don't need the selective grasses cows eat, but the still put on an average of three pounds per day. As a result, they reach a desirable slaughter weight much earlier than cows.

"Dollar for dollar, beefalo cost less," Winkler said. In fact, within a few years he predicts it will be one of the most important meats on the market.

"They're the best of both worlds," Winkler said.